"A Weakness in the Fellowship" Exodus 32:1-14

Someone once defined the human heart as "an idol factory." If "idle hands" are bound to get us into mischief, the "idols" from the heart will inevitably cause even more grief for us and for God. Our hearts, perhaps even our imaginations, are an assembly line of wishes that produces all kinds of things that we substitute for God; in which we search for our ultimate security, to which we grant our highest loyalty, and from which we expect favors in return.

From this view of human existence, we could say there are no atheists among us, only different styles of believers. We all have our "gods" with a small g. The only difference is that whereas the ancient Hebrews fell into the habit of producing physical idols of wood, metal, or fired clay, each of us creates an idol by pounding the hammer of our personal wishes on the anvil of our own self-importance.

The Jewish people have a legend that **when Abraham started out on his journey, he saw the stars in the heavens and said**, "I will worship the stars." But not long after the stars faded. **Then Abraham saw the constellations—Orion and the Pleiades and all the rest of them**—and he said, "I will worship the constellations." But the constellations also disappeared on the horizon. **Then Abraham saw the moon** sailing high in the heavens and he said, "I will worship the moon." But the moon also vanished when her season was over. **Then Abraham saw the sun in all its majesty**, coming out of his chamber like a bridegroom and rejoicing as a strong man set to run a race. But when the day was spent, he saw the sun set on the western sky. **Stars, constellations, moon, and sun were all unworthy of his worship, for all had set and all had disappeared.** Then Abraham said, **"I will worship God, for He abides forever."**

**Christian writer John White states, "Faith in the invisible God can be demonstrated by power over material things, either power to manipulate them or power to escape enslavement to them."** If someone's life is controlled by material things, it's possible that such a person knows nothing of

genuine faith. For centuries "golden calves" of all varieties have been erected as the gods that can dominate our world. They have gained control of the minds and hearts of many Christians and of many Christian churches. God must be very concerned about these human-made gods because they have a huge impact on any person's relationship with God.

Many people today view the Ten Commandments that we talked about last week as out of date laws from an ancient past. Historically there are strange laws that were written years ago that mean little or nothing today but are still on the books. For example, a law in Vermont required every driver of an automobile to stop at every intersection, turn off the car, get out to see if there are any horseback riders coming and repeat the process at the next intersection.

Or take for example the New York law that was adopted in 1918 that is still on the books. It makes it illegal for anyone to sneeze in public. That sounds silly until one realizes that in 1918, the entire world was in the grip of a flu epidemic that claimed more lives than all the battles fought in the First World War. There are countless other laws that may have sounded logical at one time but have lost their meaning and relevancy now.

Many of us might be inclined to list the second commandment with these antiquated laws. It forbids people from making and worshiping idols. The sad fact is that many who consider themselves Christian believe that God doesn't mind if the commandments are not followed today. But if our understanding is that these laws don't apply to our society in our present day and culture we are sadly misinformed and misguided. If the Ten Commandments are ignored to pursue a god of our own making, the church today has gone after a golden calf. If we have any hope of living better lives than the ancient Israelites, let's explore what happened to them at Mount Sinai…

**Verses 1-10 contain a cautionary tale about *The Power of Idols*.** The people in the wilderness could not wait for Moses to return. They had no patience. They wanted a god right now, so they formed their own. This is why God gave the FIRST FOUR Commandments: 1) *"You shall have no other gods before*

*me."* 2) *"You shall not make for yourself an image (i.e. idol) in the form of anything in heaven above or on the earth beneath or in the waters below."* Verse 5 goes on to say, *"You shall not bow down to them or worship them; for I the Lord your God, am a jealous God…"* 3) *"You shall not misuse the name of the Lord your God, for the Lord will not hold anyone guiltless who misuses his name.'* 4) *Remember the Sabbath day by keeping it holy. Six days you shall labor and do all your work, but the seventh day is a Sabbath to the Lord your God. On it you shall not do any work, neither you, not your son or daughter…"*

God's first 4 Commandments were given to direct us into a closer relationship with him. He instructed us on how to get to know him better. He wanted Israel to do it right then and he still wants us to do it right today! But people today—just like people then—have no patience for God. They demand immediate responses. If they are not served in an instant, then they deny God and make their own gods. They fashion their gods out of material possessions, earthly possessions, or even other people. They form it by their own hands and use earthly items to do it (Exodus 32:2-4). Once they are formed they then believe that these man-made gods are what save them. They claim: These are the gods that gave me a good life on earth. So, then they begin to worship them, maybe not intentionally, but make no mistake, it is a form of worship that is given to these "things." They offer sacrifices to these gods they have made.

I've been a big fan of JRR Tolkien's Lord of the Rings trilogy since I first read the books as a sophomore in college. Once I finished my list of chores, I could do whatever I wanted except leave the property at my summer job. So, I read—a lot of books. Even if you've only seen the film version of The Fellowship of the Ring you probably are familiar with the character Boromir. The character Boromir reveals *"A Weakness in the Fellowship"* because the One Ring exploits his intense desperation, his pride, and his fierce desire to save his war-torn homeland of Gondor.

As a frontline commander, Boromir bears the crushing weight of watching his people—the people of Gondor—face annihilation by Sauron's overwhelming forces. He genuinely believes that the Ring can and should be used as a weapon

for good to achieve victory. The problem is he failed to understand that the evil nature of the Ring corrupts anyone who tries to control it. It was a type of idol for the inhabitants of Middle Earth. As a mortal with human vulnerabilities, and without the deep mystical education or foresight of figures like Gandalf or Aragorn, Boromir is an easy target for the Ring's seductive promise of strength and glory. The Ring twists Boromir's pride in his own sword fighting prowess, convincing him that he alone has the strength to save everyone. But his pride ends up creating a *"Weakness in the Fellowship"* that nearly derails their quest.

**Verses 11-14 of today's passage contain a more hopeful tale that is about *The Power of Prayer*.** If Moses had not interceded for the Israelites, they would have been destroyed. Intercession is a powerful force to give salvation and faithfulness to those who desperately need it. We need intercessors—prayer warriors—who step forward and intervene for our nation, our church and ourselves. We need to recognize that this spiritual force can save the church today from worshiping idols. But we need people to pray regularly and faithfully and intercede for the church and the body of Christ. There are so many "golden calves" out there today: Money, Power, Fame, Sports, Alcohol, Drugs, Jobs, Celebrities, Self. Yes, people make themselves out to be their own "golden calves", so they formulate a statue of themselves of sorts and worship it. We should remember Boromir who had a weakness that he brought to The Fellowship of the Ring.

When Moses comes down the mountain in the verses that follow our Scripture passage, the weakness in the fellowship is revealed to Moses and Joshua. Joshua thought it was the sound of war and in a sense, it was—a war against God. It was a party hearty mindset with no regard for God. And it was the sound of defeat. Parties full of immorality, abusive actions and narcissistic behavior bring the sound of defeat not victory. In verse 19: *"When Moses approached the camp and saw the [golden] calf and the dancing his anger burned and he threw the tablets out of his hands, breaking them to pieces at the foot of the mountain."* This heartbreaking moment has led to a wacky Bible trivia question: Who broke all 10 commandments at once? Answer: Moses.

The first thing people say to justify not being held accountable for their own "golden calves" is "You are not allowed to judge me." But remember that Jesus said this in Matthew 7 to keep us from looking at the speck of sawdust in someone else's eye while having a plank in our own eye. Not judging is correct when it comes to things not clearly defined in Scripture, but when it comes to what is blatantly called sin by God, we are required by God to warn others of what is clearly sinful. When you see sin, does it make you upset? Or does it look appealing to you? When Moses asks Aaron, "*What did these people do to you that you led them into such great sin?"* (v. 21) Aaron uses the excuse that the people were *"prone to evil."* Place the blame on an outside force and make excuses for them and their families?? Yet God will always hold us accountable for our words and our actions! And God always gives people that he loves a chance to repent and turn from evil. **Human-made gods grieve God who created us because when we worship them, we forget who we are, from where we came, and to whom we belong.**

Aren't we often caught in a similar predicament as Boromir? We long to be free of earthly entanglements to serve God in the Spirit, yet we cling to something more elusive than a Golden Calf. Without realizing it, we redefine the fellowship according to our weaknesses.

Despite all this, verse 14 tells us, *"The LORD relented (i.e. changed his mind) and did not bring on his people the disaster he had threatened."* For those who hold to belief in the *immutability of God*, that God is unmoved and unchanging, that what God says, he will do, it can make us uncomfortable. Nonetheless, what God desires most is a relationship with us humans which requires God to be discernable in human terms. God relents in this case to have human writers tell the story of God's relationship with his people. In that process, as with the Incarnation of Jesus, God becomes vulnerable. It is a story of God's vulnerability and his determined pursuit of his beloved people. Exodus 32:1-14 is really a story about the "power of idols" and the "power of prayer" and how God works this out through Moses for the good of his people. May God forgive us and may God bless us, for our good and for his glory! Amen.